

The Harriman Institute Forum

**Volume 4, Number 8
August 1991**

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Coup Views



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Coup Views

Editor's note:

We were about to go to press with the Summer *Intermezzo* (August–September double issue), when ... well, you know what happened. The *Intermezzo* will appear next time (unless re-coups intervene); meanwhile, the *Forum* brings you some views of several fretful days in August 1991.

As readers of the *Forum*, you've probably spent a good part of recent weeks as we have: one ear to NPR, one to the shortwave, jumping from the BBC to Radio Moscow to strange drifting signals (one night, Byelorussia, the next, Radio Bucuresti International, the next, Radio Liberty oddly clear and bright ... where's the old standby, Radio Tirana?). And, of course, eyes glazing over, CNN to the networks to print ... for many of you, faxes humming as well, phones ringing (yes, we know you, news junkies on a high). Here at the Harriman, we added to all this our Soviet TV Project — watching Programs 1 and 2 go from bad to worse (nature films, cartoons, bad documentaries, punctuated by an *ukaz* or two, a coup, no — it's over!). One of our monitors started pulling in other satellite feeds, mostly CNN's unedited feed to Atlanta: some of the audio missing, but chitchat and nonpublic moments coming through clearly. Our archivist started receiving his independent, underground (*samizdat again?*) leaflets, newspapers, faxes (see back cover for a copy of Yeltsin's Russian resistance fax, courtesy of Eugene Beshenkovsky, Lehmann Library); camera crews trooped in and out, our senior members gave interviews in situ or showed up, disembodied voices, on our little black-and-white TV (uncabled, in a building on NY's West Side, it was moiré with sound). And throughout it all, the TV Project's faithful taped, hooted at the thugs, cheered the resistance, joked against seeming disaster for friends, relatives, *tovarishchi*, sassed the experts An editor is a media junkie by duty, in there nudging: "So, what do you think? Want to write it up? First to answer gets into print ..." And so, without further ado, **live from the Harriman:**



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Sound Bites

selected and translated by Emily Johnson

#1

From the extraordinary session of the Supreme Soviet held on 26 August:

[Note: sound quality is very poor and it is very difficult to distinguish the exact names of the delegates involved in this exchange of opinions]

Q: Vladimir Ilyich Ushakov [name?], please answer me: Are you a deputy from the Central Committee of the Communist Party?

A: Not from the Central Committee, but from the Communist Party.

Q: From the Communist Party. Today the Central Committee of the Communist Party has been disbanded. (Riotous laughter) Many *raion* committees and *oblast* committees have been sealed, their property has been nationalized. Do you morally have the right to lead this session? (Furious applause and laughter).

A: I consider that question to be aimed in a provocative manner. It is aimed at disrupting the close of the first day of this session. I prefer not to answer it.

#2

Taken from an interview with Leonid Petrovich Kravchenko, the former head of Gostelradio, broadcast on *Vzglyad* on 26 August. On the night before the announcement of the coup, Kravchenko was summoned to central Party headquarters to pick up a packet of press releases. Early in the morning, he brought them to TASS. In this interview, Kravchenko tries to exonerate himself and to protest his sudden fall from grace.

Interviewer: But what would have happened if you had gotten into the car then, with the packet of

documents from the junta, and told the driver: "We're going out of town," if you had stopped at the dacha of an old school chum who wasn't caught up in this dirty business, and burned all of it?

Kravchenko: Sasha, in the very beginning I said that the car in which I was riding that night was from the former Ninth Department, and you can't make detours in it. With me ... when I set out, even during the night, I was very alarmed. What's there to hide about that? I stopped off at this apartment in which we are now sitting — we were staying at our dacha — as if for my razor. I was slightly panicked, I am not going to hide it. I really took my razor. I took my sharpest razor. But there, behind the door, where we came in, a comrade was standing, waiting for me to come out, and the issue was not whether or not I could get away, lock myself in, barricade myself in, or something else ... the issue was that, all the same, if those documents hadn't arrived at TASS after a certain period of time, they would have arrived by a different route a little later. Without us, without me, without Shishlin, they would have come through these channels all the same.

#3

Taken from an interview with People's Deputy Viktor Alksnis broadcast on *Vzglyad* on 26 August. After complaining about the disastrous state of the Soviet economy and the disarray in Soviet government and society, Alksnis says:

I do not think that they will look for scapegoats in the countenance of the West, amongst the representatives of the West, that's probably not possible. They will find their own native scapegoats here.

Emily Johnson is curator of the Harriman Institute's Archives of Soviet Film.

Q & A

an interview with John Copp

Do the events of the past few days (the coup's rise and fall) feel to you like a rift in perestroika, an end to it, just another series of events in the historical process...?

If by the "historical process" you mean perestroika and its attendant social phenomena, I think one could say it has aspects of many of the choices you suggest. Certainly, the coup itself was a brief rift in the process of perestroika. The "gang of eight" was responding to the social dynamics put into motion by perestroika which were embodied in the new union treaty and which threatened the Soviet Union's geographic integrity, its status as a superpower in world politics, and, perhaps most importantly, their positions at the top of Soviet society. During the sixty hours in which the junta had a modicum of control over the central organs of power in the Soviet Union, its leaders attempted to stop the process of perestroika and put a brake on the engine of reform. That they were unsuccessful is a tribute to the power of the social forces which perestroika and glasnost unleashed. Ironically, if one views perestroika as a phenomenon which is purely a product of a *Communist* society, we may well be seeing its end as result of the coup.

Over the last few days, we have seen what may well be the death throes of the Communist Party in the USSR. We have seen Gavril Popov close the doors of party headquarters in Moscow, Latvians outlaw the party, Boris Yeltsin ban the operations of the party on the territory of the RSFSR, and finally Mikhail Gorbachev resign his position as General Secretary of the party and call for its dissolution throughout the Soviet Union.

However, it seems to me that perestroika, glasnost, and democratization are processes which transcend the existence of the Communist party in the Soviet Union. They are historical processes which have only just begun. This is particularly true of perestroika and democratization. The Soviets still are faced with massive economic problems, problems which have not been solved by the self-destruction of the elite of the Communist bureaucracy. Revolutionary economic changes like the change from a command economy to a market economy or vice versa take years to fully implement. The changes presently taking place in East-

ern Europe and the Soviet Union's own experience after 1917 offer ample evidence of that.

Restructuring the economy is of course by definition perestroika, but the question remains, will change necessarily be for the better? Or rather — since it's obvious that you're not assuming that the answer is yes — do you foresee restructuring that is not simply a rearrangement of old errors, but truly creates and offers new opportunities?

You're quite right when you say that I don't believe that the economic changes going on in the Soviet Union are necessarily for the better. The product of that restructuring is one which I don't believe anyone can predict at present. It is dependent on too many social and political factors. There are two enormous obstacles to the success of economic reform in the Soviet Union: political instability and the ingrained political culture of the society. With regard to the first, how can anyone introduce effective economic changes in a society which is disintegrating politically? Until the issues of independence, confederation, and who's in charge sort themselves out, it seems unlikely that any economic changes will benefit the average Soviet. This is particularly true for inhabitants of republics like Moldavia, Byelorussia, and the Central Asian republics which seem unlikely to be viable independent entities. For them, the current process of disintegration wracking the Soviet Union will almost certainly be an economic disaster.

Perhaps even more important are the questions of how the Soviets will respond to economic change. Two ingrained elements of political culture in the Soviet Union are egalitarianism and a fundamentally different work ethic from that of the West or Japan. Soviets as rule have been taught that everyone deserves not only equal opportunity but also economic equality in all senses of the word: equal pay, equal availability of goods, etc. One of the reasons the Communist Party became so unpopular in the Soviet Union is that its members received privileges far outside the ordinary. Entrepreneurs in the Soviet Union will be the object of similar ill-feeling for a long time after a market economy is introduced. The difference in the work ethic — the

result of their belief that jobs are a right, not something which must be earned — results in generally lower levels of production and competence among Soviet workers. The demands of international and domestic competition are not something for which the average Soviet worker is prepared. So, while restructuring will almost certainly result in new opportunities, whether it will be accepted by and acceptable to the average Soviet is another question entirely.

The Soviet Union and the Russian empire before it have had nearly a thousand years of either autocratic or authoritarian rule. It is a society which has had a long tradition of command and obedience. Cultural indoctrination of that sort is difficult to overcome. The coup leaders almost certainly counted on that tradition to bolster their position. And it very nearly did. Certainly, a significant portion of Soviet society believes in the values — a powerful and united Soviet Union run by a strong leader or group of leaders — represented by the coup. Dozens of opinion polls taken in the Soviet Union over the last few months attest to the growing numbers of Soviet citizens who were becoming disillusioned with perestroika and its attendant phenomena and who wished for a return to the old ways. Fully conquering such deeply rooted beliefs will take decades, not years.

In fact, I would argue that the banning of the Communist Party is a threat to the process of democratization, and not a terribly surprising one. Someone once said that "a threat to anyone's freedom is a threat to everyone's." There is a great deal of truth in that. We often forget that the Soviet Union has not always been a one-party dictatorship. From February 1917 until the tenth All-Union Congress of Soviets in 1922 there was "democracy" in Russia. It disappeared not because of a single decree or a revolution, but because of a series of decrees banning other parties perceived as a threat to the new order. First, the right wing political parties which had opposed the October Revolution were banned because they were reactionary forces. Soon thereafter, even those who had aided in sweeping aside the old order but wouldn't march lockstep with the new powers-that-be were suppressed, as "threats to the revolution." Eventually, the only political party left was the CPSU, and even within it, factionalism was banned. So while I can empathize with those demanding the banning of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, it seems to me that they are walking a very slippery slope

when they try to defend the ideals of democracy by banning political expression of any sort.

Did you find the language of the coup, particularly the edicts read out on *Vremya* on 20 August, shocking? Inexplicable?

Shocking or inexplicable — no. Appalling — yes. Shock implies surprise and I wasn't very surprised by the decrees made by the leaders of the junta. Any "good" architect of a coup would take the measures outlined on *Vremya*. Two things did surprise me: Yanaev's suggestion that Gorbachev might "get better"; and how little the coup's leaders accomplished in their attempts to enforce their will. From hindsight, one can clearly see that the failure of the coup was rooted in their apparent assumption that everyone in the Soviet Union would roll over and play dead when told to by the leaders of the government, the military, and the KGB. And they had good reason to think so: much of the central government did, or at least sat on a fence and waited to see what would happen. That was also true of republican leaders like Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan and Kravchuk of the Ukraine, neither of whom made any statement regarding the coup until it started to show signs of disintegration. Obviously not everyone was as docile. Yeltsin, Sobchak, the Moldavians, and the Muscovites are perfect examples of those who were not cowed. It would seem that glasnost and democratization have begun to make a liar out of Rousseau. At least for the time being, Russia is no longer "a land of slaves." And that is something for which President Gorbachev deserves enormous credit. He accomplished something which I doubt anyone really fully believed was possible: he changed Russian society so fully that Ivan Q. Public stood up against the authority of the Communist machine.

In conclusion to the question of whether the language of the coup was surprising, the Yanaev statement that Gorbachev's health might improve was one that few of the expert commentators on television reacted to when it was made. However, when I heard it I was startled. Political illnesses like Mr. Gorbachev's don't get better in the Soviet Union. They invariably result in the "patient's" disappearance from the Soviet political scene. The suggestion by Yanaev, the ostensible leader of the coup, that Mr. Gorbachev might "get better," suggested rather than all not being well with Mr. Gorbachev, all was not well for the junta in the Soviet Union.

Did Gorbachev "change" society or simply affirm a change that was taking place regardless? What would it take to make a more "parliamentary" type effective? Do only the more metropolitan, cosmopolitan centers offer a plausible forum for such change?

As to whether Mr. Gorbachev changed Soviet society, I would have to say the answer to your question is a resounding yes. There is no question that Mr. Gorbachev responded to pressures to reform the Soviet economy that were real and overwhelming. However, those pressures were ones that Mr. Gorbachev accepted long before almost anyone else in the Soviet Union. Certainly no one in the Soviet Union seriously expected or suggested democratization as a viable short-term option to the Soviet Union's economic problems. Gorbachev and Aleksandr Yakovlev conceived of and instituted those democratic reforms and, by doing so, instilled in the average Soviet citizen a new set of political hopes and expectations. It is that new set of hopes and expectations which offer the parliamentary figure you posit hope of success. However, a cold winter or poor harvest could kill them, and a long series of economic disasters almost certainly would.

In the long term, such change toward an acceptance and institutionalization of parliamentarianism is only viable in full and diverse political entities (Russia, the Baltic nations, etc.). Neither metropolitan, cosmopolitan centers or rural, agrarian regions can offer hope for such enormous political changes alone. Neither could survive economically alone. They need each other. While urban areas may play a leading role in the adoption and formalization of parliamentary change, it can only be effective and lasting if an entire nation accepts it. Another important point for the West to consider is that, as Japan illustrates, the differences in political culture and society from those with which most Western readers are familiar are likely to produce political structures and systems that are different — even if they are parliamentary and democratic — from those of Europe or America.

Did the actions (or lack thereof) of any particular individual or group force you revise your own beliefs or theories? Conversely, did you find any "proofs?"

One individual and two groups surprised me enough to revise my own beliefs. The coup leaders surprised me because they had so little success in enforcing their political will. Their lack of ruthlessness was something I never would have expected from the conservative elements of the CPSU. I would have expected men willing to resort to a coup, especially men who included among their number a "thug" like Boris Pugo and Viktor Kryuchkov (the architect of the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956), to have few qualms about a little bloodshed — particularly when it wasn't theirs. I also would have expected them to be better organized and to have more political savvy. The idea of entrusting the suppression of the Muscovite populace and the arrest of Boris Yeltsin to the commander of the Tula division, who was known as a supporter of both radical reform and Yeltsin, is ludicrous.

The Soviet populace also surprised me — and I would surmise that they surprised themselves and the leaders of coup as well — with its willingness to go out and face tanks with little more than words and flowers. If I had been asked to hypothesize two weeks ago about the course of a coup in the Soviet Union, I would have dismissed the people as a factor in the immediate equation. I would have been wrong. The Soviet people showed more courage and willingness to stand up for their nascent belief in the democratic process than I ever suspected they had.

Yeltsin was the one individual who surprised me. For a long time, I have viewed him as little more than an eccentric political demagogue and opportunist with few viable policies of his own. His courageous performance in standing up to the junta has forced me to revise that opinion somewhat. Yeltsin is certainly no opportunist. Opportunists don't face down tanks. However, I still have reservations about Yeltsin's ability as a political *leader*. While he is a courageous man and an excellent politician, I don't think he is capable of leading the Soviet Union out of the political and economic crisis with which it is faced without significant help from someone like Mr. Gorbachev or Aleksandr Yakovlev. And getting help in a situation when he is on top is something that I suspect Yeltsin is not terribly adept at. Yeltsin has always been something of a maverick and a lone wolf and, as Jerry Hough suggested on CNN on Saturday, August 24, he also has demonstrated dictatorial tendencies. His autocratic performance during Mr. Gorbachev's visit to the

Russian Parliament on the Friday after the coup is an excellent example of that.

Gorbachev himself reinforced my belief in his courage and conviction with his response to the junta's pressure to resign and give his blessing to the coup. I expected nothing less of the man who changed the Soviet Union, dismantled "the evil empire," and brought the world several steps closer to nuclear peace.

Does the coup fit into the scenario of Soviet history, or is it an anomaly?

The coup is a product of Soviet history, so of course it does fit in with Soviet history. An attempt by the entrenched elements of the Communist bureaucracy to preserve their power is hardly new or surprising. It has happened before. Khrushchev's assault on the privileges and stability of the bureaucracy by his so-called harebrained schemes produced a similar response from them. In fact, it was a nearly identical response. The methods, the timing, and even the language used by the junta last week were eerily similar to that which Brezhnev and his associates used in their ouster of Khrushchev in 1964. Even the failure of the coup has resonances with an earlier failed attempt to remove a Soviet leader from power. Khrushchev's victory over the Anti-Party Group in 1957 was made possible because the military didn't fully support them. When Zhukov threw his support to Khrushchev, the Anti-Party Group's attempt to oust the then General Secretary collapsed. Similarly, the inability of the junta to command the cooperation of the commanders of the Soviet air force, the Soviet air assault forces, and the Tula regiment, to say nothing of the military rank-and-file, spelled disaster for the "gang of eight."

There were two anomalies in terms of Soviet history: the existence of popular resistance to the coup and the existence of centers of governmental power and legitimacy besides the central Soviet government, e.g., Yeltsin and the Russian federal government, Sobchak and the St. Petersburg city government, the governments of the other fourteen republics, etc. Popular resistance to the will of the Communist oligarchy is a rarity in post-civil war Soviet politics. And the existence of legitimate governments, governments which were in fact "more legitimate" than the junta, gave that popular resistance a focus and base around which to rally which it had never had in the previous seventy-four years of Soviet history.

One of the more interesting questions that the appearance and effectiveness of the popular resistance raises in my mind is: Will the populace, faced with dramatic evidence that they can change their lives, apply their "lesson" to the economic problems they face? In other words, will the average Soviet apply as much energy toward the repair and revitalization of the economic system as Muscovites, particularly young ones, applied to preserving their newly granted freedoms?

Will the Union *qua* Union succeed? Do you foresee a fragmentation of economic recovery (or collapse) by region (or other division, i.e., economic base, political evolution, etc.)?

I hesitate to make predictions; however, it is fairly obvious that the Soviet Union's borders will change to some degree in the coming months. How much is a function of how rationality plays itself out against nationalism. Rationality, particularly economic, argues for the maintenance of some sort of Union. Nationalism will fragment it. It is all but certain that the Baltic republics will remove themselves from the Union as such. However, even there it has become apparent to the leaders of the three Baltic states that they need their economic ties to the rest of the Soviet Union if they are to survive — particularly in the short term. If nothing else, the difficulties in finding markets which have plagued all of Eastern Europe, including East Germany, have demonstrated how interdependent all the economies of the region are upon the Soviet Union. And Eastern Europe is much more developed than any single region in the Soviet Union, including the Baltics.

If nationality overcomes economic rationality, I believe what we will see is economic collapse which will vary in severity from region to region based on both the economic and sociological bases of the region in question. Larger, more diverse regions like the Ukraine and Russia will be better off, as will regions with relatively educated populaces like the Baltics and mainly agrarian economies like Kazakhstan. Urban areas will probably be hard hit. Recovery will eventually occur. It will be faster in the more educated areas because they will have the technological capacity to adjust. Agrarian economies will require little adjustment and as a result areas like Central Asia will stay longer in more traditional economic patterns. Strong, competent leaders may ameliorate the effects of the economic adversity which individual regions face, but in the

long run the only real hope for rapid recovery for most of the Soviet Union lies in the reestablishment and renovation of that Union.

Finally, I think ethnic enmity will provide some impetus for a reestablishment of the protective umbrella which the Union provided. This is particularly true for small groups like the Abkhazians and the Ossetians who will be under the authority of a traditional enemy. Even the Armenians and Azeris may think twice about twenty or thirty years of fruitless war with each other and Georgia.

The Gang of 8: why did they "get it wrong?" Did center-oriented misunderstanding of republic politics play a role in the failure of the coup?

It seems to me that there was a fundamental flaw in the assumptions the members of the junta made. They appeared to assume that the junta was politics as usual and that both the reformers in the government and the populace would acquiesce docilely and obediently when presented with orders to do so from the traditional bastions of Soviet power. I doubt that they really considered the possibility that anyone would resist or, if they did, that the resistance would be public and obdurate. Quite probably, the members of the junta also believed that a significant segment of Soviet society was on their side and that the desire for law and order and economic and social stability among average Soviets outweighed their desire for democracy. The leaders of the coup compounded the problems produced by their errant assumption when, faced with a defiant and angry populace, they failed to take the steps necessary to enforce their will, i.e., shooting on the populace or at least attempting to disperse the crowds through the use of tear gas and other crowd control measures. Perhaps they couldn't find troops who were willing to follow their orders. Somehow I doubt that the Ministry of the Interior's black beret troops, troops who were trained for exactly the kinds of situations with the junta was faced, would have been unwilling to "do their jobs." The same holds true for the KGB's special forces, although Gorbachev has suggested that they were unwilling to do so when ordered on Tuesday night. It seems much more likely — the disarray demonstrated by the sudden rash of illnesses among junta members (like Valentin Pavlov's decision to drink himself into oblivion) is evidence of this — that it was a lack of will that ultimately was one of the causes of the coup's collapse.

Wrong assumptions were not the only problem which afflicted the "gang of eight." The reasons for the coup's failure have been one of the favorite topics of discussion between America's journalists and their in-house Soviet experts. The list of mistakes made by the junta is almost interminable. Their use of the Tula regiment to arrest Yeltsin is one of the more interesting. Others include the arrival of the military in Moscow eight hours after the state of emergency was proclaimed on television, the four hour delay between that same decree and the arrest of Mr. Gorbachev, the small scale of their mobilization, their failure to arm their troops, their failure to cut off communications between Yeltsin and the rest of the world when it became clear that their attempt to arrest had gone awry, and their ludicrous handling of the press. The press conference on Monday was a farce. Holding a press conference to justify and explain yourselves when you're attempting a coup is not only foolish, it is counterproductive. Taking such a step makes you appear weak. And weakness emboldens those opponents who are frightened and might otherwise acquiesce. Allowing the international press to continue to operate uncensored was another cardinal error on the part of the coup leaders.

In hindsight, it seems that the coup was bungled from the beginning. It appears to have been something of a comedy of errors. That was anything but clear at the time, however. And in fact, had the Tula regiment carried out its assigned duties and arrested Yeltsin rather than becoming his protectors, the coup might have been the nearly bloodless affair that its leaders had planned, despite their mistakes and miscalculations.

The coup's leaders, as representatives of the center, did not misunderstand republic politics. On the contrary, it was a fundamental understanding of centrifugal forces — which were the product of republic politics and threatened to sunder the union — that helped prompt the leaders of the coup to act. Their immediate attempt to suppress the Baltic independence movements attests that they must have deemed it essential to squelch republic politics before they got too far out of control. Their failure to do so was probably more a function of their inability to fully command the army than it was a result of misunderstanding the will of the ethnic minorities of the Soviet Union.

Do you think that the coup leaders underestimated the possible extension of anti-center (and therefore in some sense 'anti-authoritarian')

an') sentiment in the republics? Even if they fully understood the potential for disintegration, did they assume that *no* (to Russia) was an acquiescent *no* (to authority)? And is it?

In answer to the first part of your question, yes. The extension of anti-center sentiment in the republics as we are now seeing it is a product of the failure of the coup. Had the junta succeeded as its leaders expected to the republics would have been quashed and an approximation the old Brezhnevite status quo put in place. I doubt that the members of the junta ever seriously contemplated what their failure might mean. They probably only considered what would happen if they let Gorbachev effectuate the proposed Union treaty.

In response to the second element of your question, perhaps. However, I doubt that it really mattered to them. Authority in the Soviet Union was and is inextricably Russian. There is no way to

separate the two. The other nationalities at best play token roles at the center. Even non-Russians who rise to the top, like Stalin, are "Russified" by the system. As a result, resistance to authority in the Soviet is resistance to Russia, and vice versa. And I believe resistance to central authority by the non-Russian republics was the one thing which the leaders of the coup were fully prepared to deal with. It was the resistance of Russians to their authority, particularly Muscovites with which the leaders of the coup were unprepared to deal.

John W. Copp is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Wagner College in New York City. His most recent published work has focused on the formation of the Congress of People's Deputies and the process of democratization in the Soviet Union. He is currently completing a manuscript which deals with the role of the anarchists during the Russian revolution and civil war.

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ПРЕЗИДЕНТ

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УКАЗ

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